

Review of *Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses*

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In her first book, *Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses*, Hilary Matfess explores the complex and contested role of women within Boko Haram and affected communities. Her research and its conclusions sharply remind readers that women interacting with Boko Haram do not make choices a scholarly distance away from their lived experiences and that they are not merely victims. Matfess contests many security studies and counterterrorism strategies by problematizing their proponents' neglect and/or patronizing of women. The three levels at which she explores women in relation to Boko Haram are the specific experiences of women residing in areas of northeastern Nigeria where Boko Haram is present, the fluidity and complexity of women's agency and their victimization by state and insurgent forces, and the importance of women's inclusion in security and counterterrorism studies.

The backdrop of northeastern Nigeria and Boko Haram's beginnings in the early 2000s with Mohammed Yusuf, the group's now-deceased founding leader, has created a dual state-building experience for residents in the area: the state's noted neglect of state-building activities and care for its residents, and the Salafist sect's popular social welfare mixed with anti-state ideology, performed as alternative state-building. Although elite Muslims live comfortable lives due to their political positions in local governments, Boko Haram and Yusuf worked to attract the marginalized majority who could not afford marriage, lived in low-quality housing, and had experienced the neglect of the state due to the actions of corrupt politicians. Women's experiences of state neglect in the area are also compounded by their marginalization in society. For women in northeastern Nigeria who faced economic and political discrimination before Boko Haram took hold in the region, have no control over whom they marry, and increasingly see modernization dislodge their family structures and livelihoods, the order within Boko Haram's strict following of Islamic law is a form of liberation. This held true for Yusuf's Boko Haram and remains true, even with harsher applications of the law, in Abubakar Shekau's present-day Boko Haram.

Indeed, Matfess urges that to deny women acknowledgement of the agency they utilize in interacting with or joining the group is to fundamentally misunderstand the contexts in which women make decisions. The assumptions of scholars in security and terrorism studies, Matfess argues, include a casual acceptance that men join violent groups willingly out of self-preservation and ideology, yet women only interact with such groups on the basis of their own victimization and as pawns of warfare. However, in the Nigerian state, the asymmetry of women's and men's disadvantages would indicate that women might flock to Boko Haram's anti-state ideology in greater numbers and with greater ease than men, even if this means supporting or turning a blind eye to the violence with which the group pursues its aims (63). Quoting Suba Mahmood, Matfess discusses women's agency within oppressive systems and the choice of seemingly illogical alternatives to those of secular communities: "even illiberal actions can arguably be tolerated if it is determined that they are undertaken by a freely consenting individual who acted on her own accord" (Mahmood 2001, 207, in Matfess 2017, 103). This

assertion posits that contrary to Western feminist tendencies, women's agency must include all possibilities of choice, whether those choices seem to combat oppression or actively engage with oppression. However, in cases without clearly uninhibited choice, the problem of women choosing an illiberal option cannot be regarded outside of critical engagement with the circumstances that led to the choice. Matfess asserts that the lines between consent and coercion and autonomy and oppression are not clear because of Nigeria's structural violence against women (103). Certainly, the northeastern Nigerian setting, with its state- and insurgent-perpetrated violence and neglect of human rights, does not leave women much free choice around joining a group such as Boko Haram, especially given the 'kill the men, take the women' strategy of both the insurgency and the Nigerian security sector, which leaves women to pick up the pieces of life under great material and psychological duress if they choose not to join the sect (89, 151).

Matfess also compares women's choices to join or work with the insurgency with the increased use of women as bargaining chips and suicide bombers. Women are stolen back and forth by Boko Haram and the state, and their importance as child-bearers and as domains of asserting patriarchal dominance is reflected in the gendered abductions that reach the international news circuit. Security presence in the northeast, too, has encouraged Boko Haram, like other terrorist groups globally, to adopt female suicide bomb strategies that prey upon gendered ideas of modesty, meekness, and ease of coercion. Matfess, while acknowledging women's agency and roles within the group, does not claim that the women suicide bombers of Boko Haram are actively volunteering out of religious duty; rather, she observes that these women and young girls seem to be those who have refused to marry insurgents after their abductions. However, the women who do choose to join the group seem to do so out of ideological, relational, or survival motives and marry accordingly. In her research, Matfess interviewed several women who had chosen to join the group and then been rescued by security forces against their will, and she contends that many women in IDP or deradicalization camps tend to favor the story of abduction and coercion over facing social stigmatization by admitting to joining the group willingly. This type of narrative downplays the existence of women who choose to join the sect in the popular media coverage of the insurgency. Indeed, there is a "stigma surrounding association with Boko Haram [that] incentivizes narratives of coercion and abduction [on the part of these women] rather than grappling with [truths around] the murkier depths of structural violence in Nigerian society, intergenerational conflict, and the ideological appeal of an anti-state movement" (95).

Matfess relays stories of women affected by Boko Haram to display the spectrum of agency and victimization in Islamist terrorist organizations and in the Nigerian context specifically. Yet, she goes one step further by constructing these revelations of women's realities into a case for the inclusion of women in international and national security, counterterrorism, post-conflict, and state-building strategies. Women are the most systematically marginalized by the state in northeastern Nigeria, fill the majority of IDP camps, and serve important roles as pawns, wives/mothers, and bomb-carriers for the insurgency. Thus, the study of their varying roles in the insurgency, in communities before and after interactions with Boko Haram, and in social, political, economic, and religious structures of the state, is of utmost importance to laying the groundwork for activities aimed at halting the insurgency, reconstructing after the conflict, and ensuring stable peace in the region.

Women in Nigeria suffer greatly due to Boko Haram, the state's responses to their actions, the historic legacy of structural violence against women, and the humanitarian post-conflict

discrimination against women. Many studies have found that gender inequality leads to increased instability in communities and that the best way to lasting peace is through gender-inclusive peace-building and the restructuring of cultural norms (186). As women constitute the majority of those rescued from Boko Haram and left in internally displaced person camps after surviving the violence that kills men, their voices and investments in ending the conflict and cultivating long-lasting peace are indispensable. The inclusion of women in all aspects of counterterrorism, security operations, national and local governance, religious leadership, activism, peace-building, and the restructuring of societal norms will provide positive and stable changes to ensure that insurgencies like Boko Haram cannot possibly attract women or have the power to terrorize society again. Treating women's participation in the Boko Haram insurgency as a fluid and ever-changing dynamic of gendered and local contexts will help to ensure that counterterrorism strategies can better discern true threats to peace and present methods of re-establishing state-citizen trust with women in particular. The understanding of women's agency and oppression within the sect and in terms of the northeastern region's culture and governance can be aided by discourse with women themselves – for women and for the stability of the community and country. Perhaps, Matfess states, “those who are waiting for ‘feminism’ (meaning Western feminism) to arrive in northern Nigeria should be aware of the ways in which women throughout the region have organized and advanced their own interests” and will continue to do so (63). Also, she writes, we must consider, “if women are sidelined and made more vulnerable in the post-conflict era, then who is peace for?” (186).

The compelling arguments for women's inclusion in security and counterterrorism strategies through an analysis of their roles in the insurgency as agents and victims render Matfess' book a success. The book can be read by those without any prior knowledge of the region and its insurgency, and it offers critical support of feminist security discourse and challenges to those who only see women as victims of violence. Of course, Matfess does not claim her work is the concluding research that proves women's agency in masculinized spaces of violence. Rightly so, as stronger research and arguments for women's agency within restricted choices and under multi-faceted threats of violence and marginalization need to be developed. Although her research and arguments boldly confront the seeming incompatibility of simultaneous agency and victimization, Matfess could have reached further into scholarly discourses of agency, protest, religiosity, gender, and state-building to clarify and contextualize women's roles as both agents and victims of Boko Haram's violence. Yet, no matter the reader, Matfess' deep knowledge of her subject matter and her well-articulated points illuminate the roles of women in the conflict of northeastern Nigeria and in terrorism more broadly.

Reference

Matfess, Hilary. 2017. *Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses*. London: Zed Books Ltd.